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ABSTRACT

A study examined what type of communication behaviors best friends use when they talk about their relationship (meta-relate), or discuss the nature of talk within the friendship (meta-talk). Questionnaire data collected from middle-aged adults and young college students indicated that the respondents discussed their friendships more than their conversations. Respondents indicated that their most frequently used meta-relate behaviors were discussing personal feelings, sharing intimate facts, telling each other why the friendship was special, identifying unique behaviors in the friendship, and telling each other how much they care for one another. Frequently used meta-talk behaviors included telling friends that a decision must be made regarding a solution to a problem, directing the conversation back to a topic, commenting on a friend's emotional behavior, and explaining conversations by referring to the other's wishes, feelings, or intentions. (Three tables are included; 39 references are attached.) (Author/PRA)

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# METACOMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS USED BY ADULT BEST FRIENDS

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# METACOMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS USED BY ADULT BEST FRIENDS


## Abstract

This paper reports on metacommunication behaviors used by best friends when they discuss their relationship (*meta-relate*) or their conversation (meta-talk). Questionnaire data collected from middle-aged adults and young college students indicate that the respondents discuss their friendships more than their conversations. Respondents indicated that their most frequently used meta-relate behaviors were discussing personal feelings, sharing intimate facts about oneself, telling each other why the friendship was special, identifying unique behaviors in the friendship, and telling each other how much they care for one another. Frequently used meta-talk behaviors included telling friends that a decision must be made regarding a solution to a problem, directing the conversation back to a topic, commenting on a friend's emotional behavior, and explaining conversations by referring to the other's wishes, feelings, or intentions.

# METACOMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS USED BY ADULT BEST FRIENDS

The notion that metacommunication is a desirable component of relationships has achieved the status of clinical folklore among professionals in psychology and communication even though no conclusive empirical support exists for the idea (Adler & Towne, 1987; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius; 1977).

The studies about metacommunication have been limited in scope, quantity, and design. Most have limited the definition of metacommunication to talk about one's relationship with romantic relationships most frequently serving as the relational prototype (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Parks, 1977; Phillips & Metzger, 1976; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; and Wilmot, 1985). Talking about the talk that transpired within a relationship has been slighted and studies focused upon the use of meta-talk by friends are nonexistent. A substantial limitation arises from design: most often information has been gathered from only one member of a dyad and almost exclusively from young college students. These

studies do, however, indicate that metacommunication is usefully viewed as encompassing two *forms*: meta-relating and meta-talking. Meta-relating is defined as talking about one's relationship and meta-talking means discussing the nature of a conversation within a *relationship*.

The purpose of two studies reported in this paper was to discover what type of communication behaviors best friends use when they meta-relate--talk about their relationship, or meta-talk--discuss the nature of the talk within the friendship.

## Review of the Literature

That meta-relating occurs within relationships has been established by Baxter and Wilmot (1984), Cline (1979), Owen (1985a, 1985b), Parks (1977), and Wilmot (1985). Baxter and Wilmot (1984), who investigated "secret tests" used by platonic and romantic pairs to ascertain the status of their relationships, discovered that 21% of their subjects talked openly about their affiliation. Cline (1979) discovered that if one member of the dyad began to talk about the relationship, the other member would also discuss the relationship. He estimated that strangers, roommates, and married couples metacommunicate approximately 10% of the time. Owen (1985b) studying how the phrase "I love you" was used by students to clarify their relationships concluded that partners are reluctant to express the feeling of love because it seeks a change in the relationship. Wilmot (1985) found that students self-disclosed more information about their closest relationships more often than they did about

their casual relationships and that the amount of metacommunication varied from person to person. Parks (1977) found that meta-relating was positively associated with perceived closeness. Thus, the closer the relational definition, the more likely the pair would meta-relate. When cross-sex dyads were examined, Owen (1985a) found that the main metaphor used in describing the relationships was that of a machine: e.g., "it seems like we shifted into high gear when we took that vacation" (p.4).

Others have concluded that discussions of the relationship are not permitted or are potentially harmful. Phillips and Metzger (1976) reported that friends oppose discussing the rules of their relationship even while holding each other to the rules they don't discuss. Baxter and Wilmot (1983) as well as Harvey, Weber, Yarkin and Stewart (1982) reported that talking about the relationship symbolized the death knell for the relationship and, therefore, should be avoided.

The foregoing scholars conceived of metacommunication as meta-relating: in contrast Gottman (1979); Gottman, Markman, and Notarius (1977); Ragan and Hooper (1981, 1984); Satir (1967), and Schrilfrin (1980) identified metacommunication as meta-talk. Gottman's 1979 Couples Interaction Scoring System identified four types of meta-talk: (a) back on the beam #1, a comment that directs the conversation back to a topic; (b) back on the beam #2, a comment that directs a couple's discussion toward a resolution of a problem; (c) metacommunication, a statement

about a discussion; and (d) clarification request, a statement or question asking for clarification, repetition or rephrasing of a previous statement.

Ragan and Hooper (1981) noted that meta-talk aligns communication by questioning comments that are difficult to understand, e.g., "Just what do you mean by that remark?" Ragan and Hooper (1984) noted that, in contrast, meta-talk when used by couples who were breaking up served to shift the focus of a conversation to a previous message, to evade questions, to interrogate the other, or to blame the other for the relationship failure.

Satir (1967) discovered six categories used by people when commenting on transactions. She concluded that communicators could (a) label the kind of message they were sending and how serious it was--"It was a joke"; (b) say why the message was being sent by referring to what the other did--"You helped me; I am just returning the favor"; (c) say why the message was being sent by referring to the other's wishes, feelings, or intentions--"I thought you were lonely and wanted someone to talk to"; (d) say why the message was being sent by referring to a request of the other--"You were ordering me to do something, and I don't take orders"; (e) say why the message was being sent by referring to the kind of response they were trying to elicit--"I was trying to get you to see the other side of the issue"; and (f) say why the message was being sent by specifically referring to the kind of response they were attempting to get the other to do or say or not do and not say--"I was asking for a ride; I didn't want an invitation to dinner too."

Schriffrin (1980) defined meta-talk as a sub-topic of a conversation about something else. Meta-talk could focus on the speaker's talk (e.g., "I'll put it this way") or focus on the listener's response (e.g., "What do you mean by that?"). Schriffrin also noted that meta-talk often functions as an explanation or a challenge to an evaluation (e.g., "I don't agree with that," or "That is not the point!").

Although some theorists defined metacommunication as talking about the relationship and others as talking about talk, Bernal and Baker (1979), Rossiter (1974), Rossiter and Pearce (1975), and Watzlawick et al. (1967) acknowledged a dual definition of metacommunication. Bernal and Baker identified three forms that explicit meta-talking may take: the persons, "You always interrupt"; the patterns, "Our best time for talking is after dinner"; and the relational definition, "We have been best friends since high school." Bernal and Baker also listed five meta-levels for relational talk, each increasing in abstraction. At level 1, or Object, transactions focus on things such as type of recreation or housework. At level 2, or Individual, transactions focus on persons, with mutual accusation and punctuated differences potentially occurring: "I go out because you nag"; "I nag because you go out." At level 3, or Transactional, discussions focus on the patterns of the dyadic relationship: "You keep asking me to go for coffee and I always seem to be busy when you ask." At level 4, the "you and I" talk of level 3 becomes a discussion of "us" or Relational: "We are better friends now that we don't live together, aren't we?" Assumptions, definitions, questions, and rules about the relationship are discussed

and explicitly negotiated. At level 5, the Contextual, transactions focus on life goals or personal growth: "Since my parents died, I've come to value your friendship even more." Topics include specific incidents, experiences, and wishes that set a context for the current relationship. According to Bernal and Baker, talking about the relationship process (levels three, four, or five) is better for a relationship than talking about relationship objects (levels one or two).

According to Rossiter (1974), metacommunication should be used by communicators to clarify vague feelings about what is going on in the relationship, to draw attention to the emotional states of the discussants, to check perceptions, and to provide direct feedback about the communication. Rossiter and Pearce (1975) distinguished between two major types of metacommunication--that which is an ever-present aspect of all transactions, and that which constitutes additional commentary on communicative transactions. The ever-present type of metacommunication (a) tells others how to interpret messages, (b) indicates the psychological state of the communicators, (c) tells others how the communicator sees oneself, them, and the relationship with them, and (d) indicates the intentions and expectations one has about one's own communication as well as the communication of others. The second type of metacommunication, that which constitutes an additional commentary on the communication, has four functions, which are interactive: (a) focusing conscious attention on the process of the interaction, (b) clarifying vague feelings about what is going on by drawing attention to the present emotional states of the

discussants, (c) checking perceptions with others to determine whether their perceptions coincide, and (d) providing communicators with direct feedback about their communication.

Watzlawick et al. (1967) reported that people in healthy relationships could be expected to meta-talk--to focus on what was said between those in the relationship. People whose relationships were uncertain could be expected to spend their time meta-relating--communicating about the relationship.

## Method

Two separate studies gathered information about metacommunication behaviors used by best friends. A questionnaire, The Friendship Survey, was developed by rewording scholars' definitions of metacommunication into questions. In the first investigation, packets containing two questionnaires were sent to 201 parents of students pre-registered in beginning Communication courses for the fall of 1987. Parents were asked to fill out one of the surveys and to send the other to their best friend.

Three mailings were necessary to gather 184 usable surveys from 72 men and 112 women; 103 were submitted by target parents and 81 were submitted by the parents' friends. For fear of interfering with a friendship, no follow-up letters were sent to members of the parent groups who had responded to the survey but whose friends had not. Thus, I made no attempt to bolster the return rate from the friends

group. When numbers were corrected to allow for the friends who would not receive a survey because a member of the target group could not or would not participate, the return rate for usable questionnaires was established at 47%.

The second study queried students during the spring quarter of 1989. Students were recruited by interpersonal communication instructors, an article in the campus newspaper, and campus posters. Only students with best friends in the area who could also complete the questionnaire on the day of the survey were accepted for the study. Communication instructors offered extra credit points for participation in the research. Although 152 volunteers completed the questionnaire, the sample size was reduced to 150 because two questionnaires did not have a matching response from a friend. Thus in this grouping, there were 75 student targets and 75 student friends. Women outnumbered men by nearly two to one: 95 female to 55 male volunteers.

Most of the respondents (161 from the 184 parent grouping or 87.5% and 115 from the 150 student grouping or 76.7%) had best friends of the same gender; only 58 of 334 subjects (33.4%) had cross-sex best friends. Respondents in the parents group were middle aged with 85% (156) in the 36 to 57 year age brackets. Respondents in the student group were young: 69% (104) were in the 18 to 21 age bracket and 15% (22) of the respondents were in the 22 to 25 bracket.

The length of friendship for the parents group ranged from 6 months to 50 years with the average length 14 years and the median 10 years. For the students,

the length of friendship ranged from 4 months to 25 years with the average being 5 years and the median was 2 years.

## Results

Respondents to the Friendship Survey claimed to use metacommunication with their best friends and indicated that they used about half of the meta-talk and meta-relate behaviors listed in the questionnaire. (See Table 1.)

TABLE 1. Summary of Percentages of Maximum Points for Composite Meta-Talk and Meta-Relate Scores

| Variable | N | Mean | MDN | Maximum Value | Minimum Value | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Meta-talk | | | | | | |
| Parents | 184 | 46.6% | 46% | 82% | 20% | 12.8 |
| Students | 150 | 56.6% | 56% | 82% | 28% | 10.9 |
| Meta-relate | | | | | | |
| Parents | 184 | 58.1% | 58% | 89% | 25% | 13.6% |
| Students | 150 | 61.8% | 61% | 92% | 31% | 13 |

Moreover, if respondents discussed their friendships they were also likely to have discussed their conversations (parents' $r = .7312$, $p<.001$; students' $r = .7372$, $p<.001$). A correlation analysis conducted for the target groups and for the friends

groups separately indicated that target parents appear to be slightly more likely to engage in meta-relational talk if they meta-talk than their friends (target parents $r$ = .7383, $p<.001$; parent friends $r$ = .7140, $p<.001$). The correlation scores of the student targets and their friends were almost identical, however: student targets $r$ = .7368, $p<.001$; student *friends* $r$ = .7371, $p<.001$.

A two-tailed t-test to determine whether meta-talking or meta-relating was more frequent indicated a significant difference between the two classifications. A greater distinction between meta-relating and meta-talking was reported by the parent group: parents $t[366] = 8.37155$, $p<.0001$; students $t[306] = 2.89889$, $p<.005$. A comparison of the means and medians of these scores suggests that meta-relating occurs more frequently than meta-talking (see Table 1).

Meta-relate Behaviors

Meta-relate behaviors used by student volunteers were similar to those of the parent group. The most common meta-relate behaviors reported by all of the respondents were discussing personal feelings, telling each other intimate facts about themselves, telling each other why the friendship was special, identifying unique behaviors in the friendship, and telling each other how much they care for one another (see Table 2).

Respondents--especially parents--appear reluctant to discuss ways joint decisions are made. If meta-relate metacommunication is limited to communication that

negotiates the process of the interaction and thereby establishes patterns for the relationship, then meta-relate metacommunication is less frequently used by best friends. Friends tend to avoid discussing how the friendship is working as well as their expectations for the friendship.

Nevertheless, if one of the friends begins to discuss the relationship the other friend will contribute to the conversation. Seventy percent of the respondents (73.9% of the parents group and 70% of the students group) indicated that their friend would "often" or "always" continue the dialogue. Only 7% of the parents and 7.5% of the students indicated that their friend would "never" or "rarely" add to the discourse. Thus Cline's (1979) finding that relational metacommunication begets relational discussion was supported.

More respondents in the parents group than in the students group (15.8% compared to 4.7%) estimated that they never discussed their friendship; likewise, more individuals in the parents group than in the students group (53.3% compared to 42%) estimated that they spent between 1% and 10% of their communication time meta-relating with their friends; however, more in the students group than in the parents group (53% compared to 30%) estimated that they spent over one-tenth of their time discussing their relationship.

TABLE 2. Meta-Relate Behaviors Used by Parent and Student Friends

| Questions | Group | N | Freq | Rel Freq | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 16 How often do you discuss personal feelings? | Parent | 183 | 163 | .89 | 1 |
| | Student | 150 | 137 | .91 | 1 |
| 25 Have you ever told your friend intimate facts about yourself? | Parent | 183 | 151 | .82 | 2 |
| | Student | 150 | 131 | .87 | 2 |
| 3 Have you and your friend told each other why your friendship was special? | Parent | 181 | 124 | .67 | 3 |
| | Student | 150 | 79 | .53 | 5 |
| 9 How often do you and your friend talk about the behaviors that are unique to your friendship? (Ex.: "Well, I guess we can get down to serious talk now--we've had our cup of coffee and complained about our boss.") | Parent | 183 | 112 | .61 | 4 |
| | Student | 150 | 108 | .72 | 3 |
| 12 How often do you tell each other how much you care about each other? | Parent | 184 | 112 | .61 | 5 |
| | Student | 150 | 80 | .53 | 4 |
| 34 I tell my friend what I want or need from this relationship. | Parent | 181 | 72 | .40 | 6 |
| | Student | 150 | 60 | .40 | 8 |
| 14 How often do the two of you discuss how your friendship is working (e.g., how good it is, how satisfying it is, how to improve it)? | Parent | 184 | 71 | .39 | 7 |
| | Student | 150 | 64 | .43 | 7 |
| 19 How often do you and your friend discuss the ways that you make joint decisions? (Ex.:"Have you noticed that we usually follow my ideas but only after you give your opinion?") | Parent | 184 | 63 | .34 | 8 |
| | Student | 150 | 74 | .49 | 6 |

Meta-talk Behaviors

Two-thirds of the respondents in both the parents and students groups reported using meta-talk behaviors to tell friends that a decision must be made regarding a solution to a problem (Gottman's, 1979, back on the beam #2) and to direct the conversation back to a topic (Gottman's, 1979, back on the beam #1). (See Table 3). Half of the participants in both groups indicated that they also have told their friend what they think of their friend's emotional behavior (Rossiter's, 1974, providing direct feedback about how a listener views the speaker) and that they have explained conversations by telling their friends an assumption they made about the friend's psychological state (Satir's, 1967, third category--saying why the message was sent by referring to the other's wishes, feelings or intentions).

The least frequently used meta-talk behavior was post communicative transactions as defined by Wilmot (1980) that frame an interaction and alignment talk as defined by Ragan and Hooper (1981). Less than one-third of the respondents indicated that they have talked about their last conversation in a way that clarified it. Friends also appeared reluctant to tell each other that they can't say what they mean.

Slightly more than one-third of all participants (38.6% of the parents group; 38% of the students group) estimated that they spent between 1% and 10% of their communication time meta-talking. However, nearly twice as many from the parents group as those from the students group estimated that they spent no time meta-

-talking (37.5% of the parents group; 17.3% of the students group 17.3%). Twenty-three percent of those in the parents group and 45% of those in the students group claimed that their meta-talking comprised more than 10% of their communication time.

TABLE 3. Meta-Talk Behaviors Used by Parent and Student Friends

| Questions | Group | N | Freq | Rel Freq | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 23 Have you ever told your friend that the two of you need to come to a decision regarding the solution of a problem? (Ex.: "We should decide what we're going to do about....") | Parent | 183 | 131 | .72 | 1 |
| | Student | 150 | 122 | .81 | 1 |
| 21 Have you ever directed the conversation back to a topic from which the two of you have strayed? (Ex.: "That's fine and good but getting back to....") | Parent | 184 | 119 | .65 | 2 |
| | Student | 150 | 115 | .77 | 2 |
| 18 Have you ever told your friend what you think about his or her emotional behavior? (Ex.: I think you are letting your feelings get the best of you.) | Parent | 184 | 103 | .56 | 3 |
| | Student | 150 | 109 | .73 | 4 |
| 17 Have you ever explained why you said something by telling your friend the assumption you made about your friend's wishes, feelings, or intentions? (Ex.: "I thought you were discouraged and wanted me to reassure you.") | Parent | 184 | 96 | .52 | 4 |
| | Student | 150 | 94 | .63 | 7 |

TABLE 3. (continued)

| | Group | N | Freq | Rel Freq | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11 Have you ever told your friend that you don't understand what he/she is saying? | Parent | 184 | 87 | .47 | 5 |
| | Student | 150 | 104 | .69 | 5 |
| 10 Have you ever clarified one of your comments to your friend by stating how serious the message was, saying something like, "That was a joke," or "That was an order"? | Parent | 184 | 75 | .41 | 6 |
| | Student | 150 | 109 | .73 | 3 |
| 20 Have you ever explained a message by referring to a response you were trying to get your friend to make? (Ex.:"I was trying to get you to laugh.") | Parent | 184 | 62 | .34 | 7 |
| | Student | 150 | 101 | .68 | 6 |
| 24 Have you ever told your friend or has your friend ever told you something about the tone of voice that one of you used? (Ex.: Did you mean that like it sounded?) | Parent | 184 | 60 | .33 | 8 |
| | Student | 150 | 73 | .49 | 9 |
| 13 Have you ever told your friend something like, "I just can't say what I mean today"? | Parent | 184 | 58 | .31 | 9 |
| | Student | 150 | 79 | .53 | 8 |
| 15 When you and your friend talk after having been apart, how often do you talk about the last conversation in a way that clarifies that discussion? | Parent | 179 | 52 | .28 | 10 |
| | Student | 150 | 72 | .48 | 10 |

## Discussion

Advocates of metacommunication will be quick to note that all meta-relate and meta-talk behaviors were used by at least one-third of those in the parents group and nearly one-half of those in the student group. Thus, these studies confirm the notion that metacommunication is used by best friends whether it be talking about the relationship or talking about talk.

Rossiter's (1974) definition that metacommunication provides direct feedback was supported by the findings that friends (a) tell each other what they think about the friends' emotional behavior, (b) disclose why the friendship is special, and (c) note unique behaviors within the friendship.

Results of this investigation do not support all aspects of the Rossiter definition, however. Rossiter's (1974) third function of metacommunication--checking perceptions about what is happening--was not reported by the majority of friends completing this survey: they do not discuss how the friendship is working or what they need from their own individual friendships (see Table 2 items 14 and 34). Thus, a discussion evaluating the friendship appears taboo while sharing the positive aspects of the relationship is encouraged. Hesitancy to discuss all aspects of the friendship supports the notions of Ayres (1983) that individuals avoid talking about relationships in order to keep the relationship stable, of Baxter and Wilmot (1985) that relationships can be too fragile to discuss openly, and of Phillips and Metzger

(1976) that friends oppose discussing the rules of friendship. The reluctance to discuss how the friendship is working and what one needs from it indicates that friendships may be different from dating relationships. Owen (1985a) found that the main metaphor used by dating couples was that of a machine and that they would often discuss the relationship by noting how it was working. In addition, the hesitancy to discuss what one needs from the friendship noted in these studies contradicts Block's (1980) statement that friendship is dependent upon one's ability to communicate effectively and to make known one's wants and expectations.

However, 40% of the respondents do discuss how their friendships are working and what they need from their friends and more than 50% discuss why their friendships are special. Both findings support two of Bernal and Baker's (1979) classifications of metacommunication--the discussion of the relationship and the discussion of the patterns of the interaction; they also support Rossiter's (1974) definition of metacommunication as a comment on the process of interaction. In addition, they support the finding by Owen (1984) that non live-in friends discuss their uniqueness. That the parents and students differed in the ranking of question three, telling each other why the friendship was special, probably reflects the of length of the friendship and age. Parental dyads may be more likely to voice appreciation of their friends because they have been friends longer and have helped each other to cope with some of life's crises.

The difference between the meta-talk scores for the parents group and the students group may reflect the effect of education, or worse, a biased sample. Since the study of interpersonal communication in public schools and colleges is relatively new, many in the parents group may have never received formal training in relational maintenance and may not perceive a need to discuss a conversation. Because so many of the students in this research were recruited from interpersonal communication classes, they likely have been introduced to the concept of perception checking, a skill closely related to meta-talking. In this manner the students may have incorporated perception checking communication into their friendships thus raising their meta-talking scores to an abnormally high level.

Discussing tones of voice and expressing the inability to say what one means--meta-talk which tends to stop the conversational action--were less popular meta-talk behaviors. That finding may indicate that no need exists for these forms of meta-talk in "best friend" relationships: close friends tend to feel they understand each other most often (Paine, 1974; Wright, 1978). This result, however, does not support Gottman's (1979) definition of metacommunication as a statement about a discussion that often stops the action of the conversation to comment on it. The hesitancy of friends to comment on the tone of voice the other used also negates three aspects of Rossiter's (1974) definition of metacommunication: (a) providing feedback about how a listener regards the speaker, (b) drawing attention to the interaction, and (c) disclosing the psychological state of the communicator. One explanation why

friends may not discuss tone of voice is that in doing so the commenting friend may sound like an authority figure and thus imply that one friend has more power than the other. Bell (1981) noted that friendship is founded upon equality of the partners. Another explanation would be that because friends are honest with each other there would be no need to use paralinguistic codes.

The finding that respondents indicated that they frequently redirect their conversations yet hesitate to talk about a former conversation seems contradictory in that both practices involve direct comment on the conversation. Ragan and Hooper's (1984) "let it pass" norm offers one explanation. Ragan and Hooper observed that the "letting it pass" norm was violated in fictional accounts of conflict between lovers who questioned everything the other said. Because individuals in this study were best friends and had healthy friendships, they may have perceived no need to question all that had transpired. In addition, since friendship is made up of people who understand each other (Paine, 1974; Wright, 1978), no need for clarifying a former conversation may have existed. That there was no need to discuss a previous discussion apparently negates Duck's (1980) and Wilmot's (1980) idea that friends use post communicative transactions to frame interactions. Gottman's (1979) definition of metacommunication--a statement about the discussion that often stops the action of the conversation to comment on it--is also suspect.

Although both classifications of friends hesitate to discuss former conversations, friends in the parents group appear to be more willing to discuss an assump-

tion they've made about their friends' wishes than they are to clarify a statement by affirming how serious the message was. Conversely, friends in the student group indicated that they clarified talk by stating the seriousness of the message more often than they explained an assumption about their friends' wishes. That student friends clarify the seriousness of a message may be a reflection of the difference in the generations as well as the length of friendship and life experience. Since students are more likely to be at the forefront of changes in American culture, the declaration that some statements are jokes may be necessary especially if the humor reflects an unfamiliar aspect of current events or fads. The generation gap might also explain why parents declare assumptions about their friends' wishes more than student friends. Younger people tend to be more egocentric and thus they may be less likely to consider their friends' wishes, feelings, or intentions. Because respondents in the student group have been friends for a shorter period of time, they may not know each other's conversational style and, thus, they may have a greater need to tell the other when they are being serious. Likewise, assumptions about another's behavior are often formed from one's own experience in a similar situation. Respondents in the students group may not have a repertoire of experiences to draw upon to form assumptions about another's behavior because they are young. Both meta-talk behaviors, however, support the Rossiter and Pearce (1975) definition of meta-talk as an additional commentary on the transaction as well as

Bernal and Baker's (1979) third level of relational talk: the talk about you and me, us, or the context of communication.

Neither students nor parents appear eager to explain a message by referring to the response desired from the friend. Perhaps this behavior is also unnecessary because the similarity that caused the individuals to become friends also enables them to understand each other. Talking about a desired response may also appear to be manipulative and violates the equality and voluntary norm central to the definition of friendship (Bell, 1981; Kurth, 1970; & Wright, 1978).

Selective perception may explain the finding that friends are more hesitant to admit they can't say what they mean than to tell the other that they don't understand what the other is saying. Individuals usually find it easier to note the short-comings of others than to admit their own. Another explanation comes from Bell's (1981) definition of friendship as a relationship in which individuals shut out the world and open themselves to one another. This opening of self implies that friends are attentive to one another. Attentiveness requires listening. The friend's desire to be a good listener may prompt one to ask for clarification of the statement. Wyrich (1983) noted that "listening is an important behaviour [sic] conducive to meta-communication" (p. 61).

The more commonly used meta-relate behaviors support the belief of Gottman et al. (1977) and Rossiter (1974) that relational metacommunicators would share intimacies and facts about themselves. These behaviors also support meta-relational

definitions of Bernal and Baker (1979), Owen (1984), Rossiter (1974), and Watzlawick et al. (1967) that metacommunication focuses attention on the relationship, the process of the interaction and the uniqueness of the interaction. The disclosure of personal feelings and intimate facts about oneself is consistent with the observation that self-disclosure is vital to friendship (Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Bell, 1981; Bernal & Baker, 1979; Block, 1980; Kurth, 1970; Reisman, 1981; and Rose, 1985).

This investigation demonstrated that friends in healthy relationships employ both meta-talk and meta-relating in contradiction to the notion of Watzlawick et al. (1967) that people in healthy relationships use meta-talk and that those in distressed relationships employ more meta-relating. Moreover, this study found that both groups use meta-relating more frequently than meta-talk. Thus Villard and Whipple's (1976) claim that people discuss their healthy relationships is supported. One reason why meta-talking is done less frequently was provided by Schriffrin (1980) who noted that meta-talk is likely to occur during an argument. Best friends may not argue very much!

## Conclusion

Because friends are selective in the types of meta-relate and meta-talk behaviors used, confusion about the use of metacommunication by friends is apt to persist. Friends, for example, share intimacies about themselves, explain why their

friendship is unique, but are reluctant to discuss how their relationship is working or what they need from it.

Similarly, friends waffle in their use of meta-talk. Communicators have no qualms about discussing the emotional state of their friend but hesitate to clarify the meaning of their friend's tone of voice or to declare that they themselves can't say what they mean.

The use of a self-report measure is a limitation of this research in that participants may have been inclined to respond in socially desirable ways and their answers may have been dependent upon their ability to remember dialogue. However, "in vivo" observations as well as interviews can be biased by the presence of a third party or by the interviewer's style. The self-report was chosen as the best tool for these particular studies. To help friends remember dialogues, examples of conversations were provided. Although the examples were intended to help the respondent, they too may have tainted the findings. Further, the results of these studies are from self-selected samples--volunteers who chose to return a questionnaire or to participate in campus data gathering. Nevertheless, this research does indicate the behaviors used by the volunteers.

Future investigations concerning metacommunication between best friends should study cultural differences. On one of the questionnaires a female student wrote, "It is not a Chinese way to talk about friendship. We just feel it." Scholars could also investigate whether platonic friends metacommunicate differently

than romantic partners. The impact of age on metacommunication between friends should be explored. Reherman and Bullis (1989) noted that the use of metacommunication increases with age but Shafer (1989) found no significance between age and the frequency of metacommunication for middle aged adults. Gottman and Parker (1986) noted that although young children who are friends can metacommunicate in order to resolve conflict, they rarely do so. Adolescent friends, however, regularly discuss their friendships. What metacommunication behaviors do adolescent friends use?

Researchers might also examine whether training in meta-relate talk and meta-talk has any bearing on the use of metacommunication between friends. Finally, since this research studied the behaviors friends use when they meta-talk or meta-relate, further research should investigate the strategies friends use to avoid discussing their conversations or their relationships.

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